

Coming Full Circle with Circle Tail

By Tina Mooney, MSW

On a June evening, as I was headed home from work, I had an auto accident that left me with a traumatic brain injury and a life forever altered. For the first seven years, I was so impaired it wasn't truly safe for me to be anywhere by myself, not even in my own home.

Because of balance and depth perception deficits, I frequently fell and walked into things, resulting not only in an abundance of bumps and bruises, but, on three separate occasions, new, less severe brain injuries. My memory was so impaired that even when I remembered to set the timer as a cue to take my medication, I'd all too often get distracted before I made my way to my pill box. When not at home, I was mostly in a wheelchair.

I lost a lot that day in June - skills and abilities, memories and knowledge, my paid and volunteer jobs in human services, an active and independent life and eventually, my marriage. In an instant, my world became oh so small.

And then came Stone.

Stone is a long haired Weimaraner who came to Circle Tail when he was just 8 weeks old. While his two siblings were adopted out to loving homes, Stone was a star pupil in Circle Tail's Prison Dog Training Program. Just shy of his 3rd birthday, Stone and I were partnered.

Because of Stone, not only have I left my wheelchair behind, he and I go hiking in the mountains. His assistance with balance and depth perception have empowered me to dramatically increase my physical abilities and endurance, which has, in turn, dramatically increased my cognitive abilities and endurance. Because of Stone, I've been able to return to social work, as a volunteer, helping other families whose lives have been altered by brain injury. Because of Stone, I once again lead a rich and fulfilling life. Because of Stone, my world is both bigger and brighter.

A lot of life and love have passed since that first December day Marlys introduced Stone and me. We are such a well-tuned team now, it's hard to even remember that for the first month, figuring out how to put on his harness was so difficult for me it took nearly 10 minutes every time.

Happily, throughout our time as a team, Circle Tail has been there every step of the way.

After we were partnered, Marlys helped us build on the skills Stone learned in Circle Tail's Inmate/Canine Education Program in order to ensure Stone met my specific needs. Together we taught him to bring my medication to me when the timer went off and then to bring a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Whenever we've run into new challenges, Circle Tail has been there with new solutions. When I have questions or concerns or want someone to join our "victory dance" when Stone and I accomplish some new feat, Circle Tail has been there.

Stone and I are now facing an often overwhelming obstacle and true to form, Circle Tail is there. In July, Stone became critically ill with a gastrointestinal illness. While his GI condition has thankfully resolved, it left him with a serious heart problem. In those first few days, when Stone was so acutely ill, Marlys was on the other end of the phone helping me sort through it all and perhaps most importantly, reminding me to breath. Circle Tail's Advisory Board was there as well. A Vet on the Board sent me information about Stone's condition, written in a way we "mere mortals" could understand. And now that Stone is rehabbing from his illness and adjusting to his new heart medication and cardiac testing routine, Circle Tail is once again, joining our victory dances.

The doggy cardiologist believes that with the right care, follow up and medication, it's likely we'll be able to extend Stone's healthy life. But, cardiology care is expensive. Thankfully, Stone has lots of fans and some of them joined together to create For Stone's Heart Fund. They've even built a website, <https://sites.google.com/site/forstonesheart/>. Whether or not you're able to donate, if you're a Circle Tail fan, I have no doubt you'll love the video and slideshow of Stone in action you'll find on the site.

As time goes by, more and more I will become Stone's service human. That's just fine by me as I'm more than happy to return the favor.